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MILTON'S VIEWS ON EDUCATION, THEIR PRESENT  
SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE

By PRESIDENT WILLIAM A. WEBB

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## *Milton's Views on Education, their Present Significance and Value<sup>1</sup>*

To Master Samuel Hartlib, a German gentleman of Polish extraction who resided in England during the Revolution, the people of his adopted land were deeply indebted, not only for his efforts to advance piety, learning and morality in the schools, but also for his practical contributions in the field of agricultural and industrial reform. His friendship was sought after and appreciated by some of the most illustrious of his contemporaries, both at home and abroad, and it was due to him that the writings of the Moravian reformer Comenius were introduced into England. The variety of his interests and the generosity of his nature, the latter illustrated by the liberality of his gifts to the poor scholars of the day, which sometimes reduced him to actual want, would have saved his name from oblivion, but later generations have cherished his memory mainly because it was thru his influence that John Milton in 1644 was persuaded to write out his views on education which, published in the same year as the *Areopagitica*, might very well serve as a sort of preface to the better-known essay. Thru them both runs the same compelling purpose. The tractate on education of hardly a dozen pages expresses no less than his splendid *Speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing*, his unswerving faith in the efficacy of free thought and free speech. In them both he pleads for "the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience." In them both he makes freedom based upon willing obedience to the moral law the undergirding principle of individual rectitude and national integrity.

The tractate, like most of his prose pamphlets, was a protest—Milton was ever a protestant—in this case a protest against the

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<sup>1</sup> President's Address delivered before the meeting of the Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools of the Southern States at Atlanta, Ga., November 15, 1917, and reprinted by permission from the Educational Review, New York, February, 1918.

prevailing methods of education, which, instead of offering nourishing food to the young, too frequently placed before them only "an asinine feast of sow-thistles and brambles." But the tractate was more than a protest. It was a declaration of Milton's faith in the power of education "to principle the minds of men in virtue, the only genuine source of political and individual liberty, the only true safeguard of states, the bulwark of their prosperity and renown." Such he himself declared in the autobiographic section of the *Second defense of the English people*, written some ten years later, to be the specific purpose he had in mind in its composition. It, therefore, falls naturally into its appropriate place in the cycle of his more important prose writings, for like them it revolves about the great central conception of responsible liberty, which is the controlling passion of his soul.

When Milton composed his essay he was already famous as a poet and scholar and was in all probability the most cultured man in England, if not in Europe. His scholarship embraced an intimate and an exact knowledge of the languages and literatures of both ancient and modern times, and he counted among his friends and acquaintances some of the most eminent scholars, statesmen and writers of the Continent. His patriotism had already been severely tested. In Italy at the outbreak of the Civil War, he had promptly broken off his journey and returned to England because he thought it base to be traveling for amusement abroad while his fellow citizens were fighting for liberty at home. Nor was he without experience in dealing with the practical problems of the classroom. For some years after his return from abroad, he conducted a small school for boys, first in Aldergate Street and later in Barbican Street. But his wide scholarship and his varied experiences, first as a scholar and student in St. Paul's and the University, and later as a teacher in his own school, did not save his views on educational matters from severe arraignment. Even to some of our modern students of education, the tractate is still a block of stumbling. The scheme of instruction proposed, they say, is impracticable, the course of study impossible and the goal of achievement



utterly beyond the range of any group of students less precocious than a whole college of Miltons. His critics are right. The demands he proposed to make upon the energy of his youthful scholars, if literally carried out, were simply studendous. The modern languages, Italian for example, he casually suggests might readily be picked up at any odd moments, and after the pupils have once mastered the elements of Latin and Greek there is no reason, he thinks, why they should not utilize their Sundays by learning Hebrew and the Syriac and Chaldee dialects. Geometry was to be studied as a sort of pleasant game between the masters and the scholars, and a knowledge of the physical sciences including agriculture, architecture, navigation and astronomy, was to be obtained thru Latin textbooks. It is not surprising that a recent writer in one of the standard encyclopedias refuses to believe that Milton could have been a successful teacher, and frankly declares that his excursion into the field of education is only another example of the truth that it is not much use putting Pegasus into harness. This writer, however, should not be too severely criticized; he was only following in the footsteps of the great Dr. Samuel Johnson, himself the most noted schoolmaster in English letters after Milton, who expressed doubts about the results of this "wonder-working academy" from whose walls, so far as he knew, there had never proceeded any man eminent for knowledge. But Dr. Johnson was a High-Churchman and a loyalist and was hardly prepared to do justice to the champion of the Independents who praised Cromwell and defended the regicides.

But these are not the only charges, nor the most serious ones, that might be brought against the famous essay if one were inclined to measure its shortcomings by modern standards and ideals. The students for whom Milton planned his scheme of education were the sons, and sons only, of gentle and noble parentage. The needs of the opposite sex did not come within the scope of his discussion, and he had not caught the vision splendid of our modern democratic conception of public education which offers equal opportunity to all without distinction of sex or social position. But the very limitations of Milton's

vision added to the intensity of his convictions. He had dedicated himself, soul and body, to the advancement of the principles of the Revolution and the establishment of the Commonwealth. His eyesight itself was not too precious a sacrifice for the altar of his country. He had cheerfully laid aside his "garland and singing robes" and for long years had purposely postponed the composition of his masterpiece, in order that he might perform the "lowliest duties" in behalf of his native land. The tractate is a leaf torn from his own experience and its characters are written in his heart's best blood. A brief analysis of it will show how keenly he appreciated some of the deeper problems of education and how essential he felt their proper solution was to the realization of the high ideals of citizenship which he ever exemplified in his own life and consistently taught his countrymen both by precept and example.

In the very foreground of his discourse he declares that the true aim of all educational effort is to train the man and the citizen. Not learning, not scholarship, not intellectual supremacy—as highly as he appreciated these things of themselves—but manhood in its noblest reaches is to be the high argument of his thought and the chief goal of his endeavors. In language that is couched in the theological phraseology of the day, he declares that the end of all learning is "to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love Him, to imitate Him, to be like Him, as we may the nearest, by possessing our souls of true virtue, which, being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection." The poet who was to invoke as the inspiration of his immortal epic a divinity no less exalted than the heavenly muse herself was not willing to place the foundation stone of his temple of learning on any less secure basis than the knowledge of God and the desire to know Him and be like Him. To Milton the worthiest representative of the new learning and the Renaissance no less than to Milton the Puritan and the Protestant, man's education was not complete until he had reproduced God's image on earth. "The reason, the passions, the feeling for beauty, the energies which tend to action, strength



and skill of hand, the principles of public conduct, statesmanship, law, art, war—all are sacred because all are portions of the fully developed life of man.”<sup>2</sup>

But his most valuable contribution to the literature of the subject is his famous definition of education, which alike in its simplicity of statement, its comprehensiveness of terms, and its nobleness of purpose has never been surpassed. “I call, therefore, a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war.”

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Milton's scheme of education falls into three divisions—studies, bodily exercises, and diet. Taking these in the reverse order, we may quickly dismiss the last. The hard study and spare diet of the academy which is to be the home of his pupils from their twelfth to their twenty-first year anticipate the Wordsworthian ideal of “plain living and high thinking.” Bodily exercises are to receive the attention worthy of their dignity and importance. Fencing, wrestling and other forms of athletic training were planned not merely to satisfy the needs of the physical man or to gratify the youthful inclination for sport, not merely to keep the boys “healthy, nimble and strong” and make them “grow large and tall,” but to “inspire them with a gallant and fearless courage, which being tempered with seasonable lectures and precepts to make them of true fortitude and patience will turn into a native and heroic valor and make them hate the cowardice of wrongdoing.” The daily muster included “marching, encamping, fortifying, besieging and battering, with all the helps of ancient and modern stratagems, tactics, and warlike maxims”—a program that would satisfy the most enthusiastic champion of military training in our schools and colleges. Like everything else connected with Milton's scheme of education, these exercises were directed to a definite end, namely, that from them his young men should “come forth re-

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<sup>2</sup> Dowden, *Puritan and Anglican studies*.

nowned and perfect commanders in the service of their country."

Their intellectual training begins with some simple exercises in scientific and language study, but advances rapidly until it embraces a list of writers whose names might well give pause to the stoutest hearted of modern classicists. Cebes, Plutarch, Quintilian, Plato, Cato, Varro, Columella, Aristotle, Seneca, Celsus, Pliny, Hesiod, Theocritus, Aratus, Xenophon, Cicero, Euripides, Sophocles, Demosthenes, Hermogenes, Longinus, and Horace are sufficient to indicate the range and compass of his curriculum. These authors are to be read and studied each for a particular purpose, for Milton is nothing if not practical, idealist tho he is. From them his students are to gain insight into the mysteries of agriculture, geography, economics, politics, logic, rhetoric, composition, law, mathematical and physical sciences, and theology. But let no one think for a moment that they are to be entirely separated from the swift-moving currents of everyday life. It was no monastic existence that he had in mind. On the contrary, they shall have abundant opportunity of coming in personal contact with hunters, fishermen, mariners, explorers, architects, engineers—in a word, with men of action who can give them "such a real tincture of natural knowledge as they shall never forget." Under the inspiring tuition of skilful teachers they shall receive from the philosophers, historians, orators and lawgivers "such an ingenuous and noble ardor as would not fail to make many of them renowned and matchless men." But the program is not yet complete, for there shall also be opportunity for them to study the beauties of nature, especially in "those vernal seasons of the year when the air is calm and pleasant," "the solemn and divine harmonies of music," "the tragedies of stateliest and most regal argument," the uses of poetry "both in divine and human things," and the day's work shall not cease until they shall have come under "the determinate sentence of David or Solomon, or the evangels and apostolic scriptures." By such means they shall become "inflamed with the study of learning and the admiration of virtue, stirred up with high hopes of living to be brave

men and worthy patriots, dear to God and famous to all ages." Trained in these ideals our lawyers will no longer pass the time in pleasing thoughts of "litigious terms, fat contentions, and flowing fees," our ministers will not be given over to worldly ambitions, our men of affairs will be otherwise occupied than "living out their days in feast and jollity," and our political councillors will indeed become "steadfast pillars of state."

Such is Milton's ideal "of a virtuous and noble education; laborious indeed at the first ascent, but else so smooth, so green, so full of goodly prospect and melodious sounds on every side, that the harp of Orpheus was not more charming." Since his day many of our greatest thinkers—Locke, Newman, Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin, Emerson—have written illuminatingly and convincingly on the subject of education, but I question whether any one of them has gone beyond Milton either in depicting a nobler ideal or in describing more happily the true function of education, namely, to fit one "to perform justly, skilfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war." In its clear-cut recognition of the rights of the individual on the one hand, and of the state on the other, in its provision for the full and complete development of man's physical, intellectual and spiritual nature, in its insistence upon the sanctity of truthfulness and necessity of justice, in its wideness of vision, its directness of aim, its oneness of purpose, it gives verbal expression to the very genius of the Anglo-Saxon race; and where it has been tried out, either in Great Britain or in those newer commonwealths, including our own, which have sprung from her loins, it has had a great and profound influence in determining the character and molding the destiny of the English speaking nations of the earth. If asked to account for the difference between the ideals of life and conduct which has suddenly yawned like a mighty chasm between the German nation and our own, would we not find it largely due to the fact that the German people have not yet learned the meaning and significance of that fundamental principle on which Milton based his whole scheme of education, namely, the liberty "to know, to utter and

to argue freely according to conscience?" Is it not this realizing sense of liberty of thought and action which begets soberness of judgment and disciplines one to act both justly and magnanimously as well as skilfully in the performance of public and private duties? The absence of this ideal from the German consciousness, or perhaps I should rather say a lack of its realization in German life, points to the fatally vulnerable joint in Germany's armor and indicates the place where the spear of outraged humanity will finally pierce thru to her vitals. "By the soul only the nations shall be great and free."

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Since the beginning of the war much serious thought has been given to the consideration of methods and principles of education. The main controversy, as might have been expected, has ranged around the relative advantages and disadvantages of scientific and humanistic studies. From time immemorial the man on the street has been accustomed to argue that inasmuch as a knowledge of the applied sciences has added so immensely to the material resources of the world, while literary studies have so little to show for the time and patience spent on them, we should frankly follow the trend of the times and place the burden of emphasis on those studies which promise large and visible returns in the good things of life. Since the outbreak of the war, this conception of education has won new converts by reason of the phenomenal successes of the Germans, who have shown such marvelous skill in the use of the mechanical arts and in the application of technical and scientific training to the enginery of war. Both in this country and in Great Britain there has been an increasing number of writers on education who have been demanding a reorganization of the school and college curriculum. They are insisting upon a larger substitution of scientific for literary studies and are clamoring for a still further curtailment of the classics. A knowledge of the physical sciences, such as electricity, mechanics, chemistry and the like, they declare, would be infinitely more valuable at the



present time, both for the individual and the state, than the continued study of languages, literature, or the social sciences. But after all, is there solid ground for this belief? Sir Philip Magnus, who stands high as an authority both as a scientist and as an educator, declares in a recent article that the study of literature, language and history is still a constituent element in modern education. "The main purpose," he declares, "of school-teaching is clear thinking and self-expression; and whilst the study of science, especially in its higher branches, helps to cultivate logical and accurate thought, it is only thru the medium of literature and language that thought can be adequately exprest. There should be no conflict, therefore, between these two great branches of learning, and it should be recognized that the foundations of education must rest on a humanistic basis."<sup>3</sup> This position, it seems to me, is impregnable. Each of these grand divisions of knowledge, the domain of the physical sciences on the one hand, and of the humanities on the other, has its enthusiastic advocates and loyal followers; each offers unlimited capacity for the satisfaction of the curiosity of the mind; each furnishes to a greater or less degree the chance for developing self-expression and the power of thought; each when properly pursued contributes elements which are inseparably connected with our idea of a truly educated man. In reality they are not antagonistic, but complementary. One star differeth from another star in glory. In insisting, therefore, upon the intrinsic value of literary studies we are not disparaging scientific training. Every sane man knows that in the prosecution of the war as well as in the reparation of its ravages that will come at its close, we shall use as we have never used before the scientific skill and the technical ingenuity of the American mind. But if we are wise, we shall not forget that more important lesson which a recent writer in the London *Times* has seen fit to remind his own countrymen of. "We have no wish," he says, "to neglect these (scientific) studies. They have their place. But it is the second, not the first. It is not matter but spirit that is going to win this war. It is not matter but spirit

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<sup>3</sup> *Nineteenth Century*, June, 1917.

that we are going to need to solve the problems that will come after the war. And it is literature and literature alone which can nourish that vital spirit. For literature by its very nature deals always with human life, while physical science by its very nature deals with matter which, if it has life at all, has at least no life which is human. . . The whole of the people, each for his own sake, and for the sake of all the rest too, will need a knowledge of human life. . . The wisest man of all antiquity turned away from the study of physical sciences and gave himself to that of the life of man. And why? Because, as his greatest pupil declared, 'an intelligent man will prize those studies which result in his soul getting soberness, righteousness and wisdom, and will less value the other.' ''<sup>4</sup>

Scientific studies will find their appropriate place, and it will be one of increasing honor and service, but they can never supplant without irreparable loss those disciplines whose special function it is to open the mind, to clarify the vision, and "to extend from the few to the many the delights which thought and knowledge give, saving the people from degenerating into base and corrupting pleasures by teaching them to enjoy those which are high and pure." Not even the bitter exigencies of modern warfare and the hard necessity of meeting a resourceful and unscrupulous enemy will make us forget the value of our human heritage. Surely no worse calamity could befall us intellectually and morally than the wilful neglect of those studies which have come down to us from the past redolent with the wisdom of the ages and still capable of firing the imaginations and inspiring the hearts of our youth to become "brave men and worthy patriots, dear to God and famous to all ages." If we wish to realize Milton's dream of responsible liberty thru an ordered democracy not only in our own country, but thruout the world, we must not neglect to school our children in a knowledge of those literatures which in both ancient and modern times have preserved the great ideals of the race. The necessity of this procedure is eloquently brought home to us in an

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<sup>4</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, June 1, 1916.



essay on *Education and freedom* by Professor R. S. Conway, of Manchester University. He says:

The epoch in which the free life of England bore its most glorious fruit, both in action and letters—the age of Elizabeth—was the age in which Greek literature had just been re-discovered, an age in which the Greek sense of beauty and the Greek passion for freedom inspired our own poets. For if Shakespeare knew only a little Greek, Thomas More and Spenser and Herrick and Herbert and Sidney knew a great deal; and Shakespeare's whole political thought is colored by his love for the Greek biographies of Plutarch, read in the magnificent English of Thomas North. Since that day such names as Bacon, Milton, Clarendon, Burke, Chatham, Gladstone, to mention no living examples, are those of men who have learnt from classical scholarship to be great defenders of freedom. Our public schools have not studied the ancient authors for nothing; if you want to implant in a boy some reverence for freedom, some knowledge of what it means, you will not give him definitions or well-meaning talk about civic or ethical theory; he merely hates such abstractions. Nor will you hope to achieve this end by concentrating his thoughts on the exact laws of physical science, important as they are for other ends. The study of physical science at its best should awaken some conception of the wonderfulness of the world, of the fixity of its laws, of the danger and futility of falsehood and impatient or careless observation; but for more far-reaching ideals which he is to follow in public conduct a boy must look not to the scientific but to the humane side of his training. If education is to make men good citizens of the world, not merely good carpenters and plumbers, not merely docile instruments of tyrannical commands, it must teach them something of men, must inspire them with some affection for the ideals by which mankind has been swayed. And that is the reason for the study of literature; only from the record of what men have thought and felt can a boy or girl learn to understand the conceptions that move men most. To implant the sources of morality, the ethics of private conduct, no disquisitions on the beauty of the separate virtues will ever compete with the divine parables of the New Testament; so in the region of public ethics, if you wish to kindle patriotism and courage, teach your children such poetry as the Agincourt scenes of Shakespeare's *Henry the fifth*. And if you wish to instil into a boy's mind a conception of freedom, give him to read the story of the struggle of Athens with Persia in Herodotus, or in the patriotic drama of the poet Aeschylus, who fought himself at Marathon; give him to read the defense of Plataea in Thucydides, or any one of the great speeches of Demosthenes against Philip, and he will come away with a knowledge of the meaning of freedom that no experience can blot out, with a respect for the free spirit which no hardness or bitterness of life will ever wholly extinguish.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Contemporary Review*, vol. 109.

And now, as we behold our nation—God grant she may prove both “noble and puissant”—“rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks,” as she arms herself for the purpose of bringing peace, safety and freedom to the world, shall we not rededicate ourselves to the high calling wherewith we have been called, resolved that our students shall receive as far as we are able to give them that “complete and generous education” which shall fit them “to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war?”









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